

“Over the last year, it’s gotten really bad,” Mr. Ortíz said.

A typical scheme involves kidnapping migrants and holding them until a relative in the U.S. wires money, typically thousands of dollars, in ransom money. Gangs have also attacked shelters and even some Mexican clergy members who help migrants.

There have been 636 reported cases of kidnapping, rape, torture and other violent crimes against migrants returned to Mexico under Remain in Mexico, according to Human Rights First, which interviews victims in border cities and advocates for migrants’ due process rights. At least 138 of these incidents involved kidnappings of children.

Many more cases of extortion and violence go unreported for fear of retribution. As more migrants are returned to dangerous areas such as Nuevo Laredo under Remain in Mexico, the situation is expected to worsen, the nonprofit Human Rights First said in a recent report.

The Mexican government has played down the violence. Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard recently acknowledged kidnapping incidents, but said that “it’s not a massive number.” Only 20 such cases have been investigated by the government, he added.

The Trump administration has credited the program with deterring migrants from attempting to cross into the U.S. Monthly apprehensions of migrants at the U.S. Southern border have plunged from more than 144,000 in May to 33,500 in November. The Remain in Mexico program was expanded in June.

On a recent visit to the border, acting Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said the program has been a “game-changer” for U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers because it has freed them from having to perform humanitarian duties.



But Mr. Ortiz's daily commute back and forth over the border highlights what migrants' advocates say is a key element of the program—it isolates migrants not only from the legal counsel they need to argue their asylum claims, but from resources like food, shelter and medical care that are abundant on the U.S. side, but near-nonexistent in Mexico.

“You have all this infrastructure to help feed and clothe and house people set up on this side, in Laredo and Del Rio and Eagle Pass, and then suddenly the administration changes the policy, and you have to send it all to Mexico, because now everyone is on the other side,” said Denise LaRock, a Catholic Sister who helps distribute donations to asylum seekers through the nonprofit Interfaith Welcome Coalition. Mexico has been unable to provide enough safe shelter and other resources to migrants.

In Matamoros, another large recipient of asylum seekers under the program across the border from Brownsville, Texas, a tent city of more than 3,000 people has sprung up. Migrants there have complained of overcrowding, unsanitary conditions and insufficient medical treatment. In November, a migrant from El Salvador was murdered in Tijuana, opposite San Diego, while waiting with his wife and two children for an asylum hearing under the Remain in Mexico program.



On a recent, briskly-cold Wednesday, Mr. Ortiz, dressed in a ski vest and a baseball cap with the logo of the U.S. Chaplain International Association, picked up six migrants, including two children aged 8 and 14, at the immigration office in Nuevo Laredo. All were from El Salvador, Guatemala or Honduras, and were returning from legal appointments in the U.S. Hearings take place in makeshift courts set up in tents in Laredo, just across the bridge over the Rio Grande that separates the two cities.



At the front door of the office, six young men sat idly around a motorcycle, hats pulled low over their heads, watching the scene unfold, periodically walking up to the church van and peering in. Mr. Ortíz said these men were “hawks” or lookouts for criminal gangs.

“They know who I am, I know who they are,” he said. “You have to know everyone to do this work. The cartels respect the church. I’ve driven all around Nuevo Laredo in this van, full of migrants, and they never mess with me.”

At one point two of the lookouts asked the pastor for some food. He gave them two boxes of sandwich cookies. They clapped him on the shoulder, eating the treats as they walked back to their observation post.

Mr. Ortíz, a native of central Mexico, came to the U.S. at age 15 and eventually built a small contracting business in Texas. He became an ordained Baptist minister about a decade ago and three years ago began ministering to migrants full time. This year, he converted several rooms of his home in Laredo, Texas, into a dormitory for migrants and built men’s and women’s showers in his backyard.



After picking up the migrants, Mr. Ortíz ferried the group to an unmarked safe house with a chain-locked door on a busy street in the center of Nuevo Laredo, Mexico.

Inside, about 90 migrant families crowded into rows of cots set up in a handful of bedrooms and a concrete back patio. Among the Central Americans are also migrants from Peru, Congo, Haiti, Angola and Venezuela.



Reports of migrant kidnappings have increased since the Remain in Mexico program began, Mr. Ortiz said. In September, armed men stormed the safe house—one of two that the pastor brings migrants to—and detained the shelter’s staff for about an hour.

Since then, Mr. Ortiz said, the volunteer staff has stopped allowing migrants to leave the house unaccompanied, even to buy milk for young children at a nearby store.

Rosa Asencio, a schoolteacher fleeing criminal gangs in El Salvador and traveling with her two children ages 4 and 7, was returned to Nuevo Laredo under Remain in Mexico. She says she hasn’t been outside the shelter for nearly three weeks. “They can kidnap you anywhere,” she said.



María Mazariegos, an Honduran housekeeper, said she was kidnapped along with her 12-year-old daughter Alexandra from the bus station in Nuevo Laredo in September.

Gang members held her in a windowless cinder-block room that bore signs of torture for three days with one meal of tortillas and beans. She was released after her family members in the U.S. convinced her captors that they didn’t have the money to pay a ransom.

Then, two weeks later, while she was returning from a court appointment in the U.S., a shelter staff member confirmed, another group tried to kidnap her. An escort from the shelter was able to talk the kidnappers out of it.

She has court hearing under Remain in Mexico rules on Jan. 22, where a judge is expected to decide on her asylum case. If she is rejected, she plans to move to the Mexican city of Saltillo, where she has heard there are more jobs and less violence.

“Just about anywhere is better than here,” Ms. Mazariegos added.

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